LITERACY IN CORRECTIONS

What's Happening?

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Background

In the past several years, almost all provincial and federal correctional institutions have established literacy programming. This may consist of paid teacher coordinators, peer tutoring programs, community volunteer tutoring, or upgrading facilities. The Literacy Office, has over the past two years, provided a number of services for literacy development in correctional settings such as:

initial training of paid workers, volunteer workers, peer tutors

continued support and supervision of literacy provision

advice about expansion or development of provision

coordination and collaboration for the purposes of networking literacy practitioners in correctional settings.

Current Programming

Current programming is organized in three potential combinations: peer tutoring programs, volunteer tutoring from community volunteers, paid staff who organize and teach literacy learners in their institutions. The following describes how each of these strands operates:

Peer tutoring

Inmate or resident tutors are selected from interested applicants. These tutors are not expected to be trained teachers but are expected to be fluent readers and writers. The peer tutors are given a three-day initial training which enables them to develop language experience stories, do assisted reading with learners and provide initial spelling strategies to learners.

In some institutions peer tutors identify potential students from among their fellow inmates. In other institutions the selection comes through the educational programs and counselling staff. Matching of students may be by accident or design!

Advantages: Support for the literacy program is high because of the involvement of the inmates or residents. If properly supported, the inmates can generate continued interest in the program.

Disadvantages: Often tutors are not encouraged to network with one another or given time to regularly meet and exchange information and experiences, etc. Thus, fairly untrained people

are expected to sustain interest and enthusiasm in an educational program for very vulnerable students. Often paid staff do not have time (or the resources) to coordinate the peer tutoring program and so it often flounders.

Volunteer Tutoring

Because of the high turnover of residents or inmates, some institutions use community volunteers to become literacy tutors. In these cases, volunteers are matched with literacy learners who identify themselves as needing help. The institution identifies the learner/tutor pair and is expected to provide on-going support and continued training if appropriate.

Advantages: The institution can control the tutor/student match and can usually expect a higher level of education from participating tutors. Community volunteers can help the inmate or resident maintain contact with the outside world and can help reduce their 'jail mentality'.

Disadvantages: Community volunteers, like all volunteers, are subject to job changes, interest changes, etc. and thus turnover is frequent and continuity for students is often interrupted. Likewise, volunteers can get frustrated by the short-term relationship with students who may be moved on, get released, be unable to attend sessions because of disciplinary or other institutional demands, etc.

Paid teaching staff

A relatively small number of institutions have paid literacy teachers who run literacy classes within the institutional setting. Most often paid staff are told to organize the literacy tutoring system, but are given no extra time or assistance to do so. In a number of cases, although the practitioner knows how to work with the literacy student, they have no time to develop learning programs, learning strategies and study habits with new or beginner learners.

Advantages: Students with most need (i.e. beginners and learners with more specific learning needs) are offered the expertise of experienced literacy practitioners. Learning programs can be tailored so that learners can progress into more regular college or upgrading programs.

Disadvantages: Unless the literacy programs are integrated with the other educational programs, learners may be isolated and remain in literacy settings beyond their need.

Statistics on Current Programming:

Name	Uses Paid Literacy Coordinator	Uses Peer Tutors	Uses Community Volunteers
Brandon	yes	yes, in class	no
Headingley	yes	yes	yes
Milner Ridge	no	yes	no
Rockwood	yes	as aides	yes
Portage	yes	no	no
Stony Mountain	yes	yes	yes
Youth Centres:			
Agassiz	yes	yes	yes
Manitoba	no	yes	yes

INITIATIVES THE LITERACY OFFICE HAS SPONSORED

Training

The Literacy Office has provided initial training to introduce both volunteers and/or resident tutors to literacy work. These are three day training events in which both community volunteers and residents participate.

We have found the integrated model of training which involves both community members and residents or inmates to be of great value. In this way, community volunteers are easily acclimatized to life in the jail, and inmate tutors are 'normalized' by the presence of community participant. [For example, we have found that the communications between inmates is improved through the influence of members of the community. Jail-culture attitudes, stances and communications barriers are also reduced.]

The three day initial training includes some in-put on practical and theoretical approaches for teaching literacy and also includes a practicum for trainees under the supervision of the specialist from the Literacy Office. A multi-media approach to training is taken so that tutors have a chance to practice techniques they are learning before they are permanently matched

with a learner. At the end of the initial training, participants receive a certificate signed by the Minister of Education and Training and the Director of the Literacy Office.

Evaluation of these days is conducted throughout the training. Participants are enthusiastic about the model of training and often wish that the experience was longer. The Literacy Office has also used the training as a 'weeding out' of tutors who might not be appropriate literacy tutors. In this way, program coordinators can re-locate such volunteers for other purposes in their institutions.

Sites which have participated in the initial training are:

Milner Ridge

Brandon Correctional Institution

Headingley Correctional Institution

Agassiz Youth Centre

Manitoba Youth Centre

Funding Applications

The Literacy Office has offered support and advice to the following organizations who have been successful in receiving grants so that new literacy programs could be started. Literacy initiatives are funded through grants from both the federal and provincial governments. The Literacy Office has helped the following in their grant applications:

Elizabeth Fry Society to establish a literacy program in Portage Correctional Institution for Women

John Howard Society (Brandon) to establish a literacy program in Brandon Correctional Institution

John Howard Society (Winnipeg) to establish a literacy co-ordinator position which will serve Headingley Correctional Institution and provide a community resource centre

Inmates are also released from the Dauphin Correctional Institution to attend literacy classes at the Dauphin Friendship Centre.

Coordinating and networking practitioners

Through the Literacy Workers Alliance of Manitoba (LWAM) and a new Literacy in Corrections Group, the Literacy Office has offered workshops and forums for literacy practitioners in corrections to share their problems and successes. The Literacy in Corrections Group met for the first time in October, 1989 and intend on having meetings three times per year to identify common issues and share information and approaches.

ISSUES FOR LITERACY PRACTITIONERS

The Literacy Office recently conducted an informal survey to determine problems practitioners may face in correctional settings and to identify particular needs. The main issues practitioners identified are:

a. Problems with administration

In some cases, literacy development has been stymied because the administration does not fully support the program development. Thus, tutors and learners are not given access to books, libraries, papers, pencils, etc. Quite obviously literacy instruction suffers without these supports.

RECOMMENDATION

That literacy staff, tutors, and learners have regular, consistent access to library facilities during some portion of the time spent in educational instruction.

(For further information refer to: (1) CSE Task Force recommendation that all medium security prisons and up provide library facilities to inmates (2) Provincial library job descriptions)

b. Problems with staff

In some institutions, a small percentage of guards and correctional staff impede the work by making it difficult for learners to attend programs, pulling out learners from tutoring situations just prior to their sessional times, not providing time and/or space for tutors and learners to work together, criticizing the program, etc. Practitioners have found when this situation exists the program has grave difficulties functioning.

RECOMMENDATION

That institutions give orientation about literacy programs to correctional staff at regular intervals.

c. Problems recruiting and maintaining appropriate volunteers

Many programs indicate problems in using volunteers because of the inconsistency of commitment by the volunteers, short term nature of volunteer work, re-training needs for new volunteers, etc.

Peer tutoring problems often run into the same problems, i.e. inmates get early release or parole, inmates get transferred to other prisons, etc.

RECOMMENDATION

That institutions provide extra supports needed for recruitment and support of volunteers, whether as peer tutors or community volunteers

d. Coordination problems

Most literacy practitioners are expected to coordinate volunteers, peer tutors, and carry a full-time teaching load. Very few are given sufficient time needed to support volunteers appropriately. Institutions tend to think that literacy is a 'good idea' but rarely think through the implications of setting up a literacy program.

RECOMMENDATION

That paid volunteer coordinators be appointed in all literacy programs where peer tutoring or volunteer training is part of the literacy program.

e. Problem of the lack of continuous funding

Some programs have insufficient funding or their funding is short-term or inconsistent. Learners suffer because they are unsure of the status of their program. Literacy learning is an on-going process and learners need to know their educational progress can and will continue.

RECOMMENDATION

That long-term, continuous funding be provided for literacy programs in correctional institutions.

Conclusions

Manitoba has advanced considerably in literacy work in corrections in the past several years. However, we have far to go. Corrections personnel and administration need to be aware of what the program is and how it can facilitate development of inmates. The whole issue of 'doing something for criminals' must be tackled by participating institutions in order for the programs to be successful.

The new network of literacy practitioners should not only help in sharing problems and solutions but should result in a clearer picture of what constitutes good practice in correctional settings.